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## Maine Health Alert Network (HAN) System

### PUBLIC HEALTH ADVISORY

**To:** Health Care Providers  
**From:** Dr. Isaac Benowitz, State Epidemiologist  
**Subject:** **Avian Influenza Updates, All Influenza Specimen Submission Request, and Respiratory Viral Testing Availability, Maine 2024**  
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### **Avian Influenza Updates, All Influenza Specimen Submission Request, and Respiratory Viral Testing Availability, Maine 2024**

#### **Summary**

In response to an ongoing panzootic of highly pathogenic avian influenza A(H5N1) in wild birds, poultry, and cattle, clinicians should (1) assess for relevant exposure history in patients with respiratory illness, (2) continue testing for influenza in patients with compatible illness in the summer months, and (3) send **all influenza A and influenza B** positive specimens to Maine Health and Environmental Testing Laboratory (HETL) for subtyping.

In addition to influenza, there are other respiratory viruses that cause illness in Maine, some of which circulate in the summer. HETL is now offering respiratory viral panel testing free of charge in order to better understand which viruses cause respiratory illness in Maine. Testing includes adenovirus, respiratory enterovirus, influenza A/B, parainfluenza 1-4, RSV, rhinovirus, and SARS-CoV-2, and is only available for symptomatic patients.

#### **Background**

H5N1 has been circulating globally in wild and domestic birds, including in Maine, since 2022. The most recent detection in Maine was in a backyard flock on March 18, 2024. On March 25, U.S. CDC reported a multistate outbreak of H5N1 in dairy herds. As of June 6, there are 83 affected herds in 9 states. No states in New England have affected herds. Nearly all states have had poultry outbreaks and H5N1 in wild birds. Since 2022, there have been 4 human cases of H5N1 infection, including 1 with exposure to poultry (in 2022) and 3 with contact with dairy herds (all in 2024). Public health surveillance of H5N1 and other novel influenza viruses in humans is crucial for early detection, particularly in the summer when influenza testing is not common and exposure to poultry, cattle, and swine may increase due to agricultural fairs. HETL is the only facility in Maine that can detect novel influenza viruses. For more details, visit <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/avianflu/h5-monitoring.html>.

## **Recommendations for Clinicians**

**Screening for relevant exposures:** consider the possibility of H5N1 infection in persons showing signs or symptoms of compatible illness (e.g., respiratory illness with or without fever or conjunctivitis) AND relevant exposure history.

Clinical criteria include signs and symptoms consistent with acute upper or lower respiratory tract infection, or complications of acute respiratory illness without an identified cause. In addition, gastrointestinal symptoms such as diarrhea are often reported with H5N1 virus infection. Examples include but are not limited to:

- Mild illness (e.g., cough, sore throat, eye redness or eye discharge such as conjunctivitis, fever or feeling feverish, rhinorrhea, fatigue, myalgia, arthralgia, headache)
- Moderate to severe illness (e.g., shortness of breath or difficulty breathing, altered mental status, seizures)
- Complications: pneumonia, respiratory failure, acute respiratory distress syndrome, multi-organ failure (respiratory and kidney failure), sepsis, meningoencephalitis

Relevant exposures include any of the following *within 10 days prior to symptom onset*:

- Contact with potentially infected sick or dead birds, livestock, or other animals.
- Direct contact with water or surfaces contaminated with feces, unpasteurized (raw) milk or unpasteurized dairy products, or parts of potentially infected animals.
- Prolonged exposure to potentially infected birds or other animals in a confined space.

**Testing of patients with respiratory illness and relevant exposure history:** collect recommended respiratory specimens and submit these to HETL for testing. Recommended specimens include:

- A nasopharyngeal swab in viral transport media (VTM) in conjunction with a nasal swab combined with an oropharyngeal swab in a second VTM tube (for patients without conjunctivitis)  
*OR*
- A conjunctival swab and a nasopharyngeal swab in separate VTM tubes (for patients with conjunctivitis)

For recommendations for infection prevention and control, and recommendations for influenza antiviral treatment and chemoprophylaxis, please refer to [U.S. CDC: Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza A\(H5N1\) Virus in Animals: Interim Recommendations for Prevention, Monitoring, and Public Health Investigations.](#)

**Testing of all other patients with respiratory illness:** continue testing for influenza in patients with compatible illness (e.g., respiratory illness with or without fever or conjunctivitis) throughout the summer. All positive influenza A and influenza B specimens should be sent to HETL for subtyping. If utilizing an influenza test that does not allow for excess specimen to be sent to HETL, consider collecting a second specimen.

Respiratory viral panel testing (for adenovirus, respiratory enterovirus, influenza A/B, parainfluenza 1-4, RSV, rhinovirus, and SARS-CoV-2) at HETL is now available FREE of charge. Specimens should be collected and sent to HETL for symptomatic patients who would benefit from additional respiratory viral testing.

## **Recommendations for Laboratorians**

### **Specimen submission:**

- Maine CDC requests that hospitals, long-term care facilities, outpatient offices, and clinical laboratories send **all** influenza A and influenza B positive specimens to HETL to help identify novel influenza.

- Specimen submission for this purpose follows standard submission processes which can be found at <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/public-health-systems/health-and-environmental-testing/micro/submitting-samples.shtml>
- A HETL requisition form must accompany every specimen. Influenza A/B RT-PCR testing should be indicated. The requisition form can be found at <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/public-health-systems/health-and-environmental-testing/micro/download-forms.htm>.
- Couriers may be available upon request. Please contact Maine CDC at 1-800-821-5821.
- Until further notice, upon request from the provider, specimens from patients with respiratory symptoms can now be tested for multiple respiratory viruses using a respiratory viral panel free of charge.
  - Specimen submission for this purpose follows standard submission processes which can be found at <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/public-health-systems/health-and-environmental-testing/micro/submitting-samples.shtml>
  - A HETL requisition form must accompany every specimen. Respiratory Panel by PCR testing should be indicated. The requisition form can be found at <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/public-health-systems/health-and-environmental-testing/micro/download-forms.htm>.

### **Reporting**

Human infection with novel influenza A virus, and pediatric influenza-associated deaths (with any influenza virus) are notifiable in Maine and should be reported to Maine CDC immediately, upon suspicion, by phone at 1-800-821-5821. Outbreaks and influenza-associated hospitalizations are also notifiable and should be reported to Maine CDC via phone at 1-800-821-5821, fax at 1-800-293-7534, or email at [disease.reporting@maine.gov](mailto:disease.reporting@maine.gov).

### **For more information**

- Maine CDC: Influenza: <https://www.maineclu.gov>
- U.S. CDC: Influenza: <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/index.htm>
- FluView Novel Influenza A Virus Infections: [https://gis.cdc.gov/grasp/fluview/Novel\\_Influenza.html](https://gis.cdc.gov/grasp/fluview/Novel_Influenza.html)
- Maine CDC laboratory requisition form: <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/public-health-systems/health-and-environmental-testing/micro/download-forms.htm>
- Maine CDC specimen submission information: <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/public-health-systems/health-and-environmental-testing/micro/submitting-samples.shtml>
- U.S. CDC: Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza A(H5N1) Virus in Animals: Interim Recommendations for Prevention, Monitoring, and Public Health Investigations: <https://www.cdc.gov/flu/avianflu/hpai/hpai-interim-recommendations.html>